

CONTACT: Alexa Behmer, Resource Development Director, 303.776.8184
Alternatives for Youth, Inc.
Longmont, CO 80501
alexa@alternativesforyouth.org
www.alternativesforyouth.org

Teens Give up Summer to Volunteer as Summer Program Assistants

LONGMONT, Colorado – June 25, 2008 – During the summer months, Alternatives for Youth’s building buzzes with the sounds of elementary school children scattered around the offices and meeting rooms. On Mondays and Wednesdays, the children can be found working on reading and math with adults and teen assistants, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays are out in the community, swimming, doing sports and outdoor activities, visiting museums, a farm, the Denver Zoo and other area attractions. The activity is all a part of Alternatives for Youth’s Summer Program, a low-cost, eight-week program for 80 elementary through high school students.

While the elementary school children may seem the focus of the program, behind the scenes there are nineteen middle and high school students working as teen assistants with the children, acting as mentors, coaches, roll models, chaperones, teachers and friends. These nineteen seventh to twelfth grade youth give up eight weeks of their summer to work with the program five days a week. In exchange, they gain an invaluable experience working with children four days a week and time on Fridays to work together on leadership training, college and career goal development, and pre-employment training, including applying for jobs and interviewing skills.

Program Director, Mary Vigil, commented, “I am just amazed by how these teen assistants give up their summer and free time to help make the Summer Program successful by helping younger kids. They are great roll models and inspire the kids, showing them that, yes, they can succeed and be leaders too.”

This summer, 98% of the teen assistants are Hispanic, twelve are girls, seven are boys, ten are in high school and nine in middle school. Six of the teen assistants helped last summer as teen assistants and several of them attended as young kids. Three of the students will be seniors this coming school year, and two of the teen assistants are top students at their schools. One of the girls, Maite, an eighth grader at Heritage, was in the IB program, a straight A student and the top student in her school. Another girl, who was a teen assistant last summer, will attend Niwot High School as a freshman to continue in the IB program.

Talking about being a teen assistant, Maite said, “I like spending time with the kids, learning how to help kids learn, and showing them that they can be like us, a leader. I like to help them become smart and the best in their school.” Another teen assistant, Roy, said, “The Summer Program helps me stay busy and out of trouble so I don’t do dumb things. I like to help kids stay out of trouble and to teach them things.”

At the end of the Summer Program, teen assistants are better able to articulate what they like about themselves, sharing in 2007 that they believe they are awesome, unique, respectful, independent, bright, intelligent, and successful. Teen assistants form personal post-high school career goals, including becoming teachers, doctors, and architects.

Alternatives for Youth, Inc.'s mission is to promote academic persistence and success of youth by instilling values that lead to positive choices and positive community impact and by encouraging social, cultural, and self development. Since 1978, Alternatives for Youth has been providing services to youth and their families in the Longmont community. Last year, over 700 youth and their families received services through Alternatives for Youth, including after-school homework clubs, parenting education, an alternative school for expelled youth, positive recreational activities, youth leadership opportunities, academic enrichment activities, and service learning activities. The goals of the annual Summer Program are to help youth succeed in school, to decrease the use of drugs and alcohol, and to improve behavior and life skills of all participants by providing academic assistance, safe and positive recreational activities and peer groups, and life skills and leadership training.

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